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## Understanding U.S. Caregivers' Perceptions of Youth's Sexting Motivations and Concerns About Their Children's Sexting Involvement: Fall *ConsumerStyles* Survey, 2018 and 2019

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### Abstract

Sexting is associated with a range of negative outcomes among youth. While parents and caregivers can play a critical role in the prevention of youth risk behaviors, nationally representative research has yet to examine U.S. caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations to help inform sexting risk prevention efforts. Using 2018 and 2019 Fall *ConsumerStyles* online panel survey data ( $N=1,034$ ), this study estimated and examined U.S. caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations and the associations of such perceptions with concerns about their children (ages 10–17) getting and sharing sexts (sexual messages, photos, videos). Weighted percentages were calculated to describe caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations. Logistic regression analyses were performed to examine associations between caregivers' perceptions and concerns about youth's sexting. Results suggest that many caregivers perceive youth sext because they think it is harmless (72.79%), they want to be popular or boast (70.51%), they have low self-esteem (52.00%), and/or it is part of their sexual exploration process (49.05%). Fewer caregivers perceived that youth sext because they want revenge (21.80%) or to harm others (16.06%). Caregivers' concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts were related to perceiving that youth sext because of low self-esteem, sexual exploration processes, or to harm others. The perception that youth sext because they want to be popular or boast was related to concern about youth getting but not sharing sexts. Odds of concern were significantly higher among caregivers from some racial/ethnic subgroups. Findings can inform sexting prevention efforts that include caregivers.

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**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained by Ipsos for all participants joining KnowledgePanel®. Panel members may refuse to participate in any survey at any time, including the Porter Novelli ConsumerStyles surveys.

**Ethical Approval** The analysis was based on de-identified, secondary statistical data. As such, the study was ruled exempt from Institutional Review Board review.

## Keywords

Sexting; Parents; Caregivers; Youth; Risk behaviors; Sexual violence

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## Introduction

Sexting is broadly defined as the sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexually explicit or suggestive photos, videos, or messages (i.e., sexts) using mobile devices and/or the internet (Barrense-Dias et al., 2017). It has been estimated that 13% of middle and high school students in the United States (U.S.) have ever sent and 19% have ever received a sexually explicit image (Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Youth's sexting involvement has been associated with psychological, behavioral, and relational consequences (Doyle et al., 2021). While parents and caregivers can play a critical role in the prevention of youth risk behaviors, few studies have examined caregivers' knowledge and perceptions of sexting among individuals ages 10–24, or youth sexting (Ahern et al., 2016; Fix et al., 2021; Seto et al., 2022). This research suggests that while most caregivers are aware of sexting as a potential risk behavior (Ahern et al., 2016; Seto et al., 2022), they may have different understanding about what influences youth's sexting (Fix et al., 2021). The current study aimed to contribute to this growing body of literature by examining U.S. caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations and how such perceptions are associated with their concerns about their children (ages 10–17) getting and sharing sexts.

## Youth Sexting Prevalence, Motivations, and Consequences

There is no uniform sexting definition, limiting our understanding of the nature, prevalence, and impacts of youth sexting (Madigan et al., 2018; Thomas & Cauffman, 2014). A meta-analysis of studies published from 2016 to 2020 revealed that approximately 1 in 5 youth had sent a sext, 1 in 3 had received a sext, and 1 in 7 had forwarded a sext without consent (Mori et al., 2022). This meta-analysis also suggested that youth sexting rates between 2016 and 2020 plateaued, compared to a preceding 2009–2015 meta-analysis (Madigan et al., 2018). However, youth's use of internet-based communication has recently increased due in part to COVID-19 pandemic mitigating measures (e.g., virtual learning) and increased access to smartphones and internet-connected devices—95% of teens had access to smartphones in 2022, up from 73% in 2014–15 (Vogels et al., 2022). This could have impacted the prevalence of youth sexting in recent years.

Youth sexting most often occurs within an established or desired romantic or sexual relationship (Cooper et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). Youth sext for different reasons, including sexual purposes (e.g., flirting, sexual exploration) and body image reinforcement (i.e., get positive feedback on one's appearance) (Bianchi et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2016). Concerns about peer relationships are intensified during adolescence (Orben et al., 2020). Youth's sexting involvement has been tied to peer pressure (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Lunde & Joleby, 2023), greater self-reported need for popularity (Vanden Abeele et al., 2014), and lower self-esteem (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014).

While most youth sexting is consensual, nonconsensual sexting can occur when a sext is forwarded without the permission or knowledge of the initial sender or when an unsolicited sext is received (Strasburger et al., 2019). A meta-analysis estimated that 12% of youth have forwarded a sext without consent and 8% have received a forwarded sext (Madigan et al., 2018). Youth may forward sexts without consent to get revenge, and/or cause reputational damage to the individual depicted in the sext; to boast about sexts received; or as a joke (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021; Setty & Dobson, 2024). Additionally, youth who receive unsolicited sexts may seek revenge on the sender by forwarding it to others without the original sender's consent to embarrass them or dissuade them from sending further unsolicited sexts (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021).

Research has demonstrated associations between youth's sexting involvement and a range of behavioral, relational, psychological, and system-level outcomes (Doyle et al., 2021). For example, sexting among youth has been associated with risky, increased, and early sexual behaviors (Bogner et al., 2023; Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2014; Ruvalcaba et al., 2023), as well as experiences with dating violence (Couturiaux et al., 2021; Ruvalcaba et al., 2023), cyberbullying, and alcohol use (Dake et al., 2012). It has also been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Chaudhary et al., 2017; Jasso Medrano et al., 2017). Further, underage sexting can have legal implications that vary by jurisdiction (Strasburger et al., 2019) and can result in being charged with a felony or becoming a registered sex offender (Thomas & Cauffman, 2014). Often, minors are unaware of the severity of these potential consequences (Strohmaier et al., 2014).

Notably, most research on sexting and associated outcomes does not distinguish between consensual and nonconsensual acts. A systematic review of 54 studies found that youth sexting can have, both, positive and negative outcomes; positive outcomes (i.e., enhanced trust, intimacy, connection) were found across a small number of studies and were specific to when youth sexting occurred within consensual relationships (Doyle et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the nonconsensual forwarding of sexts is recognized as an inherent risk of consensual sexting, making it difficult to determine their differential impact on youth outcomes (Krieger, 2017). One study focused on their distinctive effects found that forwarding sexts without permission and receiving unsolicited sexts were associated with psychosocial health problems while sending consensual sexts was not (Lu et al., 2021).

### Caregivers and Youth Sexting

How youth engage with digital technology can be concerning for many caregivers, including as it relates to sexual messages (Anderson, 2019; Gelles-Watnick, 2022). Access to devices with text messaging and internet-based communication (e.g., social media, gaming) can allow youth to easily connect with peers (Mentor, 2018). Yet, the impact of virtual spaces on youth is complex and can vary based on individual strengths and vulnerabilities, as well as cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors (Beyens et al., 2020; U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). As such, it is imperative for caregivers to consider youth's safety in digital technology use (Seto et al., 2022).

Parents and other prosocial adults (e.g., extended family members, teachers) can play a key role in the prevention of technology-facilitated youth risk behaviors and violence. They

can establish family environments that support healthy development, promote social norms that protect against violence, teach and strengthen youth skills, contribute to providing quality education early in life, and create protective community environments—all of which are evidence-based strategies for violence prevention (Basile et al., 2016; David-Ferdon et al., 2016). Caregivers' mediation, supervision, and willingness to talk to youth about the potential risks of sexting can support youth in developing and maintaining healthy relationships with peers, including through online spaces (Corcoran et al., 2022; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2018). As such, it is critical that we understand and address caregivers' perspectives and concerns regarding youth's sexting, to help them be best prepared to support the prevention of its potential negative consequences.

The majority of U.S. parents and caregivers (57%) say they worry a lot or some about their children sending or receiving explicit messages (Anderson, 2019). In a 2016 qualitative study, nearly all caregivers (97%) reported that they were aware of sexting while less than a third (27%) said they had discussed sexting with their child (Ahern et al., 2016). In more recent quantitative research, 66% of caregivers reported talking to their child about sexually explicit image sharing, 39% thought their child had shared a sexually explicit image, and 38% said they felt prepared if their child's sexually explicit images were leaked (Seto et al., 2022). The same study found that caregivers were more likely to expect their child had sexted (i.e., shared sexually explicit images of themselves) if they had fewer technology rules, held more permissive sexting attitudes, and expected their child's peers had shared sexts (Seto et al., 2022).

Research into caregivers' perceptions of the reasons why youth sext is scarce. However, a qualitative study conducted in 2012–2013 stands out for examining caregivers' awareness of the factors influencing youths' sexting behaviors (Fix et al., 2021). It found that most caregivers think adolescent sexting is motivated by a desire to feel accepted by peers or to be popular. Other reasons for adolescent sexting mentioned in that study's focus groups with caregivers included curiosity/experimentation, low self-esteem, and a sense of security provided by sending sexual content electronically that would not be experienced if it occurred face-to-face. Findings were mixed regarding caregivers' beliefs about whether the potential consequences of sexting were known to or influential for youth. The current study builds upon Fix et al. (2021) by examining caregivers' perceptions of youths' sexting motivations and their concerns about their children sending and getting sexts using quantitative measures, a larger and nationally representative sample, and more recent data.

Caregivers' concerns about their children's online behaviors often stem from a desire to protect their children from potential risks (Boyd & Hargittai, 2013). However, the connection between caregivers' perceptions about sexting and their concerns about their children's sexting remains unclear. For instance, caregivers who think that youth who are involved in sexting to harm others might be more concerned about their children getting and sharing sexts than caregivers who do not hold this belief. Caregivers' concerns about sexting may also vary by their sociodemographic characteristics. For example, female caregivers may perceive themselves as more knowledgeable about youth's online activities than male caregivers (Symons et al., 2017). Further, some research suggests that concerns about teen's social media use vary by parental race/ethnicity, with Hispanic parents more

likely to express a high level of concern about teens being exposed to explicit content or oversharing on social media, compared to Black or White parents (Gelles-Watnick, 2022). Lastly, caregivers' age and education influence the strategies they use to mediate youth's technology use, potentially impacting their awareness of and concerns about sexting (Nagy et al., 2023). Understanding the nuanced ways in which caregivers' perceptions about youth sexting generally relate to their concerns about their children's sexting is crucial for developing targeted programs and interventions that support effective parenting strategies and educate both caregivers and youth about the implications of online behaviors.

## Study Purpose

This study aimed to provide nationally representative estimates of U.S. caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations. Additionally, it examined how caregivers' concerns about their own children (ages 10–17) getting or sharing sexts (sexual messages, photos, or videos) are associated with their perceptions of youth's sexting motivations, controlling for their sociodemographic characteristics.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The current study involved a cross-sectional, secondary analysis of 2018 and 2019 Fall *ConsumerStyles* survey data. Porter Novelli conducts *ConsumerStyles* surveys seasonally using Ipsos' KnowledgePanel<sup>®</sup>, an online panel of approximately 55,000 individuals designed to be representative of the non-institutionalized adult (age 18 years or older) U.S. population (Porter Novelli, 2023). Online panel members are recruited by mail using probability-based sampling by household address. Internet is provided as needed, and cash-equivalent rewards or sweepstakes for survey completion are offered.

Fall *ConsumerStyles* was sent to a sample of 4494 panelists in 2018 (response rate = 79.24%,  $n = 3561$ ) and 4,677 panelists in 2019 (response rate = 77.49%,  $n = 3624$ ) (Novelli, 2023). The sample for this study was further limited to individuals who self-identified as caregivers of youth ages 10–17 years ( $n = 568$  in 2018;  $n = 581$  in 2019). To avoid duplicating responses from caregivers who participated in both the 2018 and 2019 surveys ( $n = 115$ ), only their 2018 survey response was included as part of this study, resulting in an analytic sample of  $n = 1034$ . Caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations and concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts did not differ by survey participation year (i.e., 2018 only, 2019 only, or both 2018 and 2019).

### Measures

Caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations were measured using the question, "I think some children are involved in sexting because...", which asked respondents to select all that applied from the following options: they think it is harmless, they want to be popular or to boast, they have low self-esteem, it is part of their sexual exploration process, they want revenge against a love partner, they want to harm others, or none of the above. This question was developed by subject matter experts and is consistent with prior research on

sexting (see Anastassiou, 2017; Cooper et al., 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021).

Caregivers' concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts were both assessed by the question, "I'm concerned that my child(ren) might be...", which asked respondents to select all that applied from a list of items, including "getting sexual messages, photos, videos" and "sharing sexual messages, photos, videos."

Caregivers' sociodemographic characteristics included sex, age (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50 years), race and ethnicity (Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic other race or multiracial), and education level (less than high school degree, high school degree, some college, bachelor's degree or higher).

### Statistical Analysis

Porter Novelli provides weighting variables so that data can be representative of the non-institutionalized U.S. population. Weights are designed to match U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) proportions for sex, age, household income, race/ethnicity, household size, education, census region, and metro status in the year before survey collection. Descriptive statistics, including unweighted frequencies and weighted percentages, were used to describe the distribution of caregivers' sociodemographic characteristics, concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts, and their perceptions of youth's sexting motivations.

Next, logistic regression analyses were employed to assess the associations among caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations and their concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts, controlling for caregivers' sociodemographic characteristics. Concerns about youth getting sexts and about youth sharing sexts were examined separately. Odds ratios (OR) represent the association between the predictive variable and the outcome, controlling for all other variables. Associations were considered statistically significant if the 95% confidence interval (CI) of the OR did not contain 1.00. Logistic regression analyses were based on unweighted data, given that survey design variables were not available to account for sampling methods. Respondents with missing values on any item ( $n = 18$ ) were excluded from logistic regression analyses. All analyses were performed in SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Cary, NC).

## Results

### Caregivers' Sociodemographic Characteristics and Concerns About Youth's Sexting

Most caregivers were female (57.86%), 30–49 years old (68.36%), and non-Hispanic White (58.00%) (Table 1). More than a third of caregivers had a bachelor's degree or higher education (35.05%), while 10.34% had less than a high school degree. Overall, 12.22% of caregivers were concerned that their child might be getting sexts and 10.00% were concerned that their child might be sharing sexts.

### Caregivers' Perceptions of Youth's Sexting Motivations

The most reported perceptions of why some youth engage in sexting included that they think it is harmless (72.79%) and they want to be popular or to boast (70.51%) (Table

2). Roughly half of caregivers thought some youth sext because they have low self-esteem (52.00%) or it is part of their sexual exploration process (49.05%). Less than a quarter of caregivers reported that they thought youth sext because they want revenge against a love partner (21.80%) or to harm others (16.06%). Five percent (5.09%) of caregivers said they held none of the above perceptions.

### **Associations Between Caregivers' Perceptions and Concerns About Youth's Sexting**

Controlling for all other variables, caregivers who self-identified as non-Hispanic other race or multiracial had higher odds of being concerned about their children getting sexts than caregivers who were non-Hispanic White (OR = 1.91, 95% CI [1.02–3.61]) (Table 3). Caregivers had greater odds of concern about their children getting sexts if they perceived that youth sext because they want to be popular or boast (OR = 2.09, 95% CI [1.20–3.68]), they have low self-esteem (OR = 1.86, 95% CI [1.18–2.92]), it is part of their sexual exploration process (OR = 1.91, 95% CI [1.23–2.97]), or they want to harm others (OR = 1.95, 95% CI [1.07–3.56]) than caregivers who did not hold such perceptions.

In terms of sharing sexts, caregivers who were Hispanic (OR = 1.93, 95% CI [1.06–3.52]) or another non-Hispanic race or multiracial (OR = 2.20, 95% CI [1.16–4.19]) had higher odds of reporting concern about their children sharing sexts than caregivers who were non-Hispanic White. Odds of concern about children sharing sexts were higher among caregivers who believed that factors like low self-esteem (OR = 2.16, 95% CI [1.32–3.53]), sexual exploration processes (OR = 1.72, 95% CI [1.08–2.74]), or intentions to harm others (OR = 2.03, 95% CI [1.07–3.83]) motivate youth sexting behavior.

### **Discussion**

This study found that U.S. caregivers' most commonly held perception of why some youth are involved in sexting was because they think it is harmless (72.79%). Yet, there are potential risks associated with sexting, including the permanence of sent messages, the possibility that messages will be forwarded without consent, damage to one's reputation, and potential legal consequences (Doyle et al., 2021; Strasburger et al., 2019). While youth may be aware of these risks (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), caregivers could discuss with them strategies to minimize risks associated with consensual sexting and reduce nonconsensual sexting (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). Prevention and intervention efforts may also enhance youth's ability to recognize instances of nonconsensual sexting and encourage them to report these to parents and other prosocial adults (Dully et al., 2023).

The second most common perception held by caregivers was that youth sext because they want to be popular or to boast (70.51%), consistent with social influence and peer acceptance concerns being heightened during adolescence (Orben et al., 2020). Indeed, interest in popularity can lead youth to engage in risk behaviors such as sexting, which may be encouraged by peers or influenced by perceptions of peer behaviors (Maheux et al., 2020). It is important for caregivers to acknowledge the need for belonging as a healthy part of development and encourage youth to explore positive ways to engage with peers.

Caregivers can support youth in finding healthy ways to build positive connections with peers, including through digital technology (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020).

Roughly half of caregivers (52.00%) thought some youth sext because they have low self-esteem. This perception is consistent with both theoretical work on adolescents' sexual identity development (Brown, 2000) and empirical findings (Peng et al., 2021; Wachs et al., 2017; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). For example, Ybarra and Mitchell (2014) found that adolescents who sent sexts reported lower self-esteem than those who did not. A subsequent study by Wachs et al. (2017) reported congruent results, finding that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between self-control and sending sexts. These findings suggest that caregivers building warm relationships with youth can enhance their self-esteem (Peng et al., 2021), which may reduce their sexting involvement.

This study's findings also suggest that nearly half of caregivers (49.05%) think that youth sext as part of their sexual exploration process. This is consistent with research that supports sexual exploration as healthy and normative sexual development (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Steinberg et al., 2019; Thomas & Cauffman, 2014; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2011), which can be facilitated by digital technology. It is also aligned with qualitative research findings that show young people view sexting as part of a sexual experimentation phase when not ready to engage in physical sexual acts (Anastassiou, 2017). Caregivers and educators may support youth's healthy sexual development by incorporating sexting into their sex education efforts, including discussions of its potential risks, outcomes, and safety considerations (Basile et al., 2016; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2018).

This study also found that lower proportions of caregivers thought that youth engage in sexting because they want revenge against a love partner (21.80%) or they want to harm others (16.06%). While nonconsensual sexting occurs less frequently than consensual sexting (Madigan et al., 2018; Mori et al., 2022), nonconsensual sexual image sharing or sexting someone without their consent (i.e., nonconsensual sexting) is a form of sexual violence (Basile et al., 2014). Having a nonconsensual sexual image shared has been linked to depression, anxiety, feelings of self-blame, bullying, and social isolation (Schmidt et al., 2024).

Youth may be reluctant to report non-consensual sexts that they witness or experience because of difficulties in identifying the original distributor of the sext, concerns about peer disapproval, or fears that reporting may make the problem worse (Setty & Dobson, 2024). When responding to youth reports of nonconsensual sexting, caregivers could avoid suggesting or implying the subject of the sext is somehow at fault (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). Programs that engage influential adults and peers to promote positive relationship expectations and reject violent and unhealthy behaviors, such as nonconsensual sexting, are critical to disrupt violence and enforce norms disapproving of violence (Niolon et al., 2017).

Additionally, this study's findings demonstrate that caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations relate to their concerns about their children being involved in it. Caregivers' concerns about their children both getting and sharing sexts were related to



perceiving that youth sext because of low self-esteem, sexual exploration processes, or to harm others. While some caregivers recognize sexting as part of the sexual exploration process, they may still harbor concerns about their children's involvement in sexting. Further research is needed to understand the underlying reasons for these concerns, possibly considering caregivers' increased awareness of sexting's potential benefits and risks, which could lead to a heightened vigilance over their child's digital interactions.

Similarly, thinking that youth sext to be popular or boast was associated with concerns about their children getting sexts, yet it was not associated with concerns about them sharing sexts. Additional research is necessary to further understand this finding. Potential reasons could include that caregivers may be particularly concerned about their children receiving sexts motivated by a desire to be popular or boast due to the risks of peer pressure, exposure to inappropriate content, and potential legal implications. They also might believe that their child has more control over sharing content than receiving it. This belief could stem from caregivers' confidence in the values they have instilled in their children, leading them to trust that their child understands the consequences and would choose not to engage in such behavior. Taken together, these findings support the possibility of incorporating sexting prevention in caregivers' efforts related to youth sexual health, self-esteem, and violence prevention.

Further, this study found caregivers from some racial/ethnic minority groups had higher odds of expressing concern about their children's sexting involvement. Specifically, caregivers who self-identified as non-Hispanic other or multiracial had higher odds of reporting concern about their children getting and sharing sexts than non-Hispanic White caregivers. Hispanic caregivers also had higher odds of reporting concern about their children sharing sexts than non-Hispanic White caregivers. It remains to be understood whether the racial/ethnic differences in concern about children's sexting involvement are related to documented disparities in sexual violence rates by race and ethnicity. For instance, a greater proportion of non-Hispanic multiracial adults experience sexual violence in their lifetime compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Basile et al., 2022), which may contribute to more awareness of sexting's potential harms, and, in turn, greater concern about their children's sexting.

Given different forms of violence are interconnected (Wilkins et al., 2014), future research could explore the potential for youth's sexting risk prevention through evidence-based strategies for the prevention of different forms of violence. As sexting has been associated with bullying (Espelage et al., 2018; Ojeda et al., 2019; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019), risky sexual behaviors (Bogner et al., 2023; Houck et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2014; Ruvalcaba et al., 2023), and dating violence (Bianchi et al., 2021; Couturiaux et al., 2021), sexting risk prevention could be incorporated into sexual health, bullying, and dating violence prevention efforts. One successful evidence-based comprehensive prevention model is Dating Matters<sup>®</sup>, which has been demonstrated to not only reduce dating violence (Niolon et al., 2019) but also to lower sexual harassment (DeGue et al., 2021), peer violence, bullying, and cyberbullying (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2021).

Consistency in sexting definitions across research is also critical to understanding youth's sexting motivations and behaviors, as well as caregivers' understanding of it. As such, increased research to understand differences in sexting definitions—across research and between youth and caregivers—is needed (Barrense-Dias et al., 2019). Further, it is important to explore how caregivers' perceptions of sexting motivations—including the role of potential cultural norms/expectations about youth's sexual activity across different racial/ethnic groups—relate to how they discuss sexting with their children and how they may respond to them sharing or receiving sexts. The COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly reduced opportunities for in-person interaction and increased reliance on digital communication, may have exacerbated concerns around sexting. This shift could persist post-pandemic, as behaviors adopted during this period continue to influence youth's communication habits.

## Limitations

As with any research, this study had some limitations. First, data for this study were collected in 2018 and 2019—before the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of physical distancing, stay-at-home orders, and other mitigating measures. Leisure screen time increased during this period (Trott et al., 2022) and could have changed caregivers' understanding or concerns about youth's sexting. Nonetheless, our findings provide important baseline data for future research on caregivers' perceptions of youth sexting. Second, while the methods employed by KnowledgePanel® (IPSOS, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) have been demonstrated to produce nationally representative estimates of the U.S. non-institutionalized adult population, it is possible that online panel surveys differ systematically from the general population. Third, as with any self-reported survey, social desirability bias is possible. Notably, this analysis assessed caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations generally rather than their perceptions of their own children's sexting motivations, which could influence their level of concern about their children's sexting. Measures for caregivers' concerns about their children's sexting also did not provide additional context about whether sexts received or shared were consensual or nonconsensual (e.g., receiving an unsolicited sext, sharing a sext of someone else without consent). Lastly, logistic regression analyses were based on unweighted data, resulting in small subsamples for certain groups and making it difficult to assess potential interaction effects. It is possible that caregivers' different sociodemographic characteristics interact to influence their sexting concerns.

## Conclusions

Youth's involvement in sexting has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes (Doyle et al., 2021). While studies have suggested that caregivers are aware of sexting as a potential risk behavior (Anderson, 2019; Fix et al., 2021), research had yet to examine U.S. caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations using a nationally representative sample. Using 2018 and 2019 Fall *ConsumerStyles* survey data, this study found that most U.S. caregivers perceived youth to sext because they think it is harmless or want to be popular or boast. Fewer caregivers perceived that youth sext because they want revenge or

to harm others. Further, caregivers' perceptions about youth's sexting motivations related to their concerns about their children's sexting involvement.

Caregivers can play a critical role in the prevention of risk behaviors (Basile et al., 2016; David-Ferdon et al., 2016)—including youth sexting—as well as help reduce its potential harms. Overall, this study's findings underscore the need to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills for caregivers to talk to youth about sexting. In particular, caregivers can discuss its risk for harm, potential legal implications, what to do when they receive an unsolicited sext, as well as how sexting relates to digital citizenship and sexual health. Also, differences in caregivers' concern about their children's sexting involvement by race/ethnicity stress the need to ensure that all caregivers have access to resources to help them communicate with youth and promote healthy relationships. Findings from this study can inform efforts aimed at enhancing caregivers' awareness, knowledge, and skills to discuss sexting with youth and appropriately respond to youth's sexting when it occurs.

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## Availability of Data and Material

This study consists of the secondary analysis of 2018 and 2019 Fall *ConsumerStyles* data, proprietary of Porter Novelli.

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**Table 1**

Caregivers' sociodemographic characteristics and concerns about their children getting and sharing sexts, Fall ConsumerStyles Survey, 2018 and 2019 ( $N = 1034$ )

	Unweighted N	Weighted %
Sex		
Female	544	57.86
Male	490	42.14
Age group (years)		
18–29	56	9.48
30–39	264	28.60
40–49	415	39.76
50	299	22.16
Race and ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	699	58.00
Hispanic	138	18.70
Black, non-Hispanic	98	13.06
Other or multiracial, non-Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	99	10.24
Education level		
Less than high school degree	57	10.34
High school degree	259	27.71
Some college	294	26.89
Bachelor's degree or higher	424	35.05
Concerns about children's sexting		
I am concerned that my child might be <sup>b</sup>		
Getting sexual messages, photos, videos	120	12.22
Sharing sexual messages, photos, videos	102	10.00

<sup>a</sup>Other includes respondents who self-reported to be non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaskan Native, non-Hispanic Asian, non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic of another race or more than one race, and non-Hispanic with race unknown

<sup>b</sup>Multiple responses allowed



**Table 2**

Caregivers' perceptions of youth's sexting motivations, Fall ConsumerStyles Survey, 2018 and 2019 ( $N=1034$ )

	Unweighted N	Weighted %
I think some children are involved in sexting because <sup>a</sup>		
They think it is harmless	756	72.79
They want to be popular or to boast	723	70.51
They have low self-esteem	539	52.00
It is part of their sexual exploration process	532	49.05
They want revenge against a love partner	243	21.80
They want to harm others	178	16.06
None of the above	46	5.09

<sup>a</sup>Multiple responses allowed

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**Table 3**

Odds of caregivers' concern about their children getting and sharing sexts by their sociodemographic characteristics and perceptions of youth's sexting motivations, Fall ConsumerStyles Survey, 2018 and 2019 ( $N = 1034$ )

	Concerned that their child(ren) is/are	
	Getting sexual messages, photos, videos OR (95% CI)	Sharing sexual messages, photos, videos OR (95% CI)
Sex		
Female	0.86 (0.57, 1.29)	0.86 (0.56, 1.34)
Male	Ref	Ref
Age group (years)		
18–29	Ref	Ref
30–39	1.25 (0.45, 3.51)	0.91 (0.32, 2.58)
40–49	1.59 (0.58, 4.35)	1.16 (0.42, 3.18)
50	0.98 (0.34, 2.81)	0.82 (0.29, 2.37)
Race and ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	Ref	Ref
Hispanic	1.61 (0.92, 2.82)	<b>1.93 (1.06, 3.52)</b>
Black, non-Hispanic	1.14 (0.53, 2.43)	1.54 (0.71, 3.34)
Other or multiracial, non-Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	<b>1.91 (1.02, 3.61)</b>	<b>2.20 (1.16, 4.19)</b>
Education level		
Less than high school degree	Ref	Ref
High school degree	0.88 (0.35, 2.24)	0.90 (0.31, 2.63)
Some college	0.72 (0.28, 1.83)	0.82 (0.28, 2.39)
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.81 (0.32, 2.03)	1.32 (0.47, 3.71)
I think some children are involved in sexting because <sup>b</sup>		
They think it is harmless	0.86 (0.51, 1.46)	0.92 (0.53, 1.62)
They want to be popular or to boast	<b>2.09 (1.20, 3.68)</b>	1.20 (0.70, 2.07)
They have low self-esteem	<b>1.86 (1.18, 2.92)</b>	<b>2.16 (1.32, 3.53)</b>
It is part of their sexual exploration process	<b>1.91 (1.23, 2.97)</b>	<b>1.72 (1.08, 2.74)</b>
They want revenge against a love partner	0.62 (0.34, 1.13)	0.65 (0.34, 1.23)
They want to harm others	<b>1.95 (1.07, 3.56)</b>	<b>2.03 (1.07, 3.83)</b>

Analyses based on unweighted data. Analyses exclude respondents with missing values on any item ( $n = 18$ ). Odds ratios represent the relationship between the variable and the outcome, controlling for all other variables shown in table. Bolding indicates statistical significance

OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval

<sup>a</sup>Other includes respondents who self-reported to be non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaskan Native, non-Hispanic Asian, non-Hispanic Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic of another race or more than one race, and non-Hispanic with race unknown

<sup>b</sup>Reference group for each item is no/not selected